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Dislocating Labour: Anthropological  
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Cheryl Mei-ting Schmitz

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## RÉFÉRENCE

HARVEY Penny & KROHN-HANSEN Christian (eds.).— Dislocating Labour: Anthropological Reconfigurations. Special issue, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 24 (1), Sussex, Royal Anthropological Institute, 2018, 202 p., index.

- 1 What is labor? Is it a concept that retains value for anthropologists, or social scientists more generally? And if so, how should we understand it? In 2013, a group of anthropologists based at the University of Oslo gathered to begin a discussion that would last several years. Their questions about the labor concept, and about how to understand the multiple social transformations they encountered through their ethnographic research, gave rise to a formalized reading group examining both classic texts in labor studies and contemporary anthropological interventions. The discussion continued over panels and conferences organized, culminating in 2015 with a workshop in Oslo, “The Reconfiguring of Labor: Reflections for Contemporary Anthropology,” coordinated by Christian Krohn-Hansen and Penny Harvey. This special issue of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* thus emerges as the collective product of participants in an extended conversation. Together, they aim to reconsider the concept of labor, and the kinds of analysis it may imply, by employing anthropological perspectives grounded in ethnographic specificity. The editors seek to make a broad disciplinary intervention, as they hope the collected articles will inspire anthropologists generally, including those who might not consider their work to be

primarily “economic,” to attend to the complexities of labor and its accompanying dislocations (p. 24).

- 2 In their introduction, Harvey and Krohn-Hansen situate the special issue in relation to anthropological debates around recent historical developments, such as the rise of neoliberal regimes in post-Fordist and post-Socialist societies, the globalization of supply chains, and the spread of “wageless life.” The authors identify “dislocation” as a keyword encompassing dispossession, disorganization, movement in space, and the feelings of disruption brought together at this juncture. This introductory essay is followed by a theoretical piece in which Susana Nartozky specifies what kind of labor concept would be most effective for anthropology today. Her analysis involves a rereading of Marx in which, she argues, labor is nowhere limited to an industrial capitalist setting, but should rather be understood broadly as creative energy expended for the reproduction of human life (p. 34). Thus, the concrete and abstract aspects of labor are mutually constitutive and simultaneously transform each other through social and relational processes (p. 41). As the editors note, what this volume offers is precisely an “ethnographic exploration of this dynamic tension between concrete and abstract labor” (p. 20).
- 3 The remaining ethnographic research articles are divided into three sections: “Labor and Capital,” “Disorganization, Precarity, and Affect,” and “Shifting Relations between State, Capital, and Place.” In the first section, Sylvia Yanagisako, Alanna Cant, Marit Melhuus, and Keir Martin each interrogate the classic political economic relation between wage labor and capital, by demonstrating how such categories are fluidly produced and by emphasizing the importance of so-called “extra-economic” factors, like kinship and morality. The second section, composed of pieces by Jan Grill, Penny Harvey, and Elisabeth Schober, traces the affective and political dimensions of some major challenges to organized labor or even waged work itself in the current moment. These essays provide a vision of how global neoliberalization is experienced at very different local sites. The authors featured in the third section, Ben Campbell, Ingjerd Hoëm, and Christian Krohn-Hansen, examine various disruptions that local communities face as a result of global capitalist restructuring and the changing role of the State.
- 4 Many of the authors are influenced by, and therefore pose their interventions in relation to, Marxist traditions of understanding labor. For instance, Sylvia Yanagisako, troubles conventional understandings of the capital-labor relation by presenting a case in which the boundary between labor and capital shifts: while managers of family-run textile businesses in Italy might undergo a “conversion” from laborers into capitalists, once they move to China, they encounter a hardening of the division between two classes. Marit Melhuus, re-analyzing fieldwork he conducted in the 1970s among tobacco cultivators in Argentina, finds several exceptions to what is commonly understood as the typical Marxist model of labor relations under capitalism. He shifts his focus to the household, as a site of intersection between political and moral economy where production of a certain kind of livelihood is intimately related to specific labor regimes. Christian Krohn-Hansen extends an insight from *Capital* Volume 2 about the multiple and contradictory rhythms of capitalist production, consumption, and circulation (p. 180). At the same time that they are subject to increased pressures to compete globally under conditions of transnational capitalist “time-space compression,” the Dominican furniture makers he engages with experience blockages,

slowdowns, and a general condition of waiting, in part due to the structure of the Dominican State (p. 187). Two of the most compelling pieces, Jan Grill's "Re-Learning to Labor?" and Keir Martin's "Wage-Labor and a Double Separation in Papua New Guinea and Beyond," convincingly show how concepts like work or labor cannot be taken as givens, since they can be manipulated and performed for various social and political ends. In Grill's study, the Slovakian State attempts to impose certain moralizing notions of labor onto Roma/Gypsy participants in a work-training program, while the participants themselves question the usefulness of the habits they are expected to cultivate but in fact only superficially act out. Martin, in conversation not only with Marx but also with Lockean notions of property and personhood, analyzes how the idea of wage labor, because it implies a separation between one's person and the activities performed as "labor," can be used to separate oneself from other people to whom one might have previously been reciprocally obligated. Far from rejecting Marxist traditions, these authors seek a way to reconcile abstract theorizations with the concrete messiness of the ethnographic record. Concepts like alienation, surplus value, or the labor-capital relation offer points of comparison through which the significance of their ethnographic cases come to light.

- 5 The strength of this special issue is the way in which it brings together analyses situated in a wide variety of locales. Collectively, these articles offer a transnational perspective that is grounded in highly specific fieldwork-based studies. The richness of the ethnographic cases notwithstanding, the collection does suffer from a striking omission: not one of the articles is based on fieldwork in an African setting. The absence of African ethnographic material is especially surprising considering the editors' explicit mention, in their introduction, of the exceptional foresight of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, and later the Manchester School led by Max Gluckman, for turning attention to labor relations in central African societies as early as the 1930s and '40s (p. 15). This was a time when most anthropological research was dominated by structural functionalist models, when analyses of stasis and tradition in rural communities were privileged over those that revealed the transformations of modern urban life. These early anthropologists' shift to focus on African mines and townships was already a dislocation from the "industrial heartlands" that the editors of this special issue point to as the origin site for the concept of labor. And the vision of African social change, in both rural and urban contexts, similarly echoes the "dislocations" investigated by many contributors to this volume. Anthropologists of Africa might therefore offer a particularly important response to the provocations offered here.

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